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The History of the Early Theatre in Kentucky

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THE HISTORY OF THE EARLY THEATRE IN KENTUCKY

BY

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A THESIS

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OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

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PREFACE

The material for this study of the theatre in the early days of Kentucky has been derived from the following sources: the Kentucky Library of Western Kentucky State Teachers College; the Lexington Public Library; the Louisville Public Library; the libraries of the University of Louisville and the Filson Club, Louisville, Kentucky; and the library of the University of Chicago.

I am grateful to Dr. Gordon Wilson, Head of the Department of English in Western Kentucky State Teachers College, Bowling Green, Kentucky, for the inspiration and encouragement that he has given me and for his patient and painstaking supervision of this work.

I wish to thank Mrs. M. A. Leiper for her personal assistance in the Kentucky Library and Miss Martha Orendorf for her aid in securing material from other libraries. The services of the librarians in the other libraries mentioned above were also very helpful. To all who have assisted me I am grateful.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to make a study of the pioneer theatre in the early days of Kentucky with emphasis laid on theatrical life in Lexington, Frankfort, and Louisville. The end of the first half of the nineteenth century marks the approximate close of the period studied.

Theatrical activity first thrived in Lexington and Frankfort, but soon Louisville became the most important scene of dramatic performances, and more attention is given the latter city in this study. Information concerning dramatic activity in smaller towns is scarce, and it is not likely that there were many performances given in them.

As a basis for my bibliography I used Ralph Leslie Rusk's The Literature of the Middle Western Frontier.

CHAPTER I

ATTITUDE TOWARD THE THEATRE

By the beginning of the nineteenth century a fondness for shows and play-acting was evident among the people of Kentucky. The first attempts at amateur theatricals were well received and encouraged, and the greater part of the citizens looked upon the drama as a welcome and harmless, not as a sinful, diversion. Seeking to enjoy life while they could and feeling the need for some sort of amusement, early Kentuckians, in general, considered the pioneer theatre an intellectual entertainment and a center of culture. To them it was, perhaps, an effective tie by which they could bind themselves to the life that they had left behind and, at the same time, retain, in the rough Western country, some semblance of the culture of their ancestors.

That the drama should have taken root earlier and more readily in Kentucky than in the other Western states of the early nineteenth century is not altogether surprising, for the people of this state must have inherited their keen interest in it. Kentucky's geographical nearness to Virginia undoubtedly had some influence on her early theatrical history. The Virginians, descendants of the Cavaliers, were a pleasure-loving people who had brought with them from England a love of the drama and a lenient

¹ Ralph Leslie Rusk, The Literature of the Middle Western Frontier (New York, Columbia University Press, 1926), I, 352-361. Rusk gives the following dates for the appearance of amateur theatricals: Lexington, 1799; Cincinnati, 1801; Louisville, at least by 1808; St. Louis, 1815; Detroit, 1816, (Doubtful). Cf. also pp. 440-446. Professional companies appeared fairly continuously in Louisville and Lexington from the 1810-1811 season; Cincinnati had only one company (in 1811) before 1815; St. Louis and Detroit were not visited by professionals until 1818 and 1827, respectively. Cf. also William Dunlap, A History of the American Theatre (New York, J. Harper, 1852), p. 348.

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attitude toward the theatre. The fact that the first settlers of Virginia were members of the Established Church of England, which was more liberal in regard to drama than other sects, probably accounts for the fact that Virginia was the first home of the theatre in America. This colony was one of the two which never had laws prohibiting play-acting.² None of the bitterness of the New England Puritan toward the theatre was felt by the early Virginian; in fact, he gladly welcomed plays and players. Some of these Virginians, crossing the mountains and settling in Kentucky, brought with them into the West a fondness for shows, a willingness to encourage whatever theatricals might come their way, and often a desire to participate in amateur performances.

There is evidence that the only two towns of any size in Kentucky at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Lexington and Louisville, amply encouraged actors and acting. Lexington, rapidly becoming noted for its intelligence, literary culture, and good taste, led the way.³ The interest in amateur theatricals had grown so by 1801 that the Court House, where plays had been presented, was no longer adequate. The need for an actual theatre was felt, and from that time on Lexington had a place called "the Theatre," where amateurs performed several years before the coming of professionals.⁴ Another indication of the keen interest the people of this town felt in the drama was the warm reception given the opening of a new

² Arthur Hornblow, A History of the Theatre in America (Philadelphia, J.B. Lippincott Co., 1919), I, 39.

³ See George W. Rusk, History of Lexington (Cincinnati, Robert Clarke and Co., 1872), p. 303. Rusk states that by 1824 Lexington had become known as the Athens of the West.

⁴ Rusk, op.cit., p. 353.

theatre in October, 1808.⁵ The drama had by this time become an important and vital part of the social and cultural life of Lexington, and it was highly appreciated by the residents. In 1816 the famous Drake Company appearing there was given a general welcome from the newspapers.⁶

Newspaper notices of the day and comments from travelers visiting Lexington leave little doubt that the theatre early stood high in the favor of the inhabitants, and for many years this center of culture and learning in the West was a favorite and profitable stopping-place for both resident companies and traveling stars.

Louisville, too, had an early interest in theatricals, but the beginning there was, undoubtedly, a little later than that in Lexington. That the city had a theatre, however poor it might have been, as early as 1808 is a significant fact and confirms the belief that the residents had a keen liking for dramatics. There are probably fewer facts from which to draw conclusions concerning the early theatre in Louisville than in Lexington, but those that have come to light are equally favorable to the drama. One writer says that "a fondness for shows, natural to all mankind, was early evinced by the people of The Falls, and had been quickened and cultivated ... by private theatricals."⁷ From an early period, long before the drama had a permanent home there, strolling companies, coming down the river on

⁵ Dunlap, op. cit., p. 348.

⁶ N. M. Ludlow, Dramatic Life as I Found it (St. Louis, G. I. Jones and Co., 1880), p. 91.

⁷ John Thompson Gray, A Kentucky Chronicle (New York, The Neale Publishing Co., 1906), p. 118. Gray states, p. 27, that among the many private journals in his possession he finds frequent references to theatricals.

flat boats, were favorably and profitably received. Here, too, as well as in Lexington, professional companies were welcomed. Without doubt, Louisville was included in the circuit of the Douglas Company, the first professional company to appear in Kentucky.⁸ Lualow, coming to Louisville with the Drake Company, says that the house was well filled every night for the season of about ten or eleven weeks when the company made its first appearance there, and he describes the people as gay, prosperous, and fond of theatrical amusements.⁹ He also states that Cincinnati (in 1817) could not or would not afford encouragement to the drama, whereas Louisville and Lexington, each half its size, liberally supported it.¹⁰ So it would seem that, in general, the people of Louisville, as well as those of Lexington, welcomed the drama with open arms and gave it as much encouragement as possible.

The attitude of the residents of smaller towns of Kentucky toward professionals was doubtless a similar one. The people of Frankfort gladly welcomed the Drake Company, and brief performances at Harrodsburg and Danville were well attended and favorably received.¹² It is likely that plays by amateur companies in small towns were numerous, possibly more numerous than those given by professional performers.

⁸ John Melish, Travels in the United States of America... (Philadelphia, Thomas and George Palmer, 1812), II, 186.

⁹ Op. cit., p. 89.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 115.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 85 and 102.

¹² Ibid., pp. 94-96.

It must not be overlooked, however, that there was some opposition to the theatre. This was, perhaps, more bitter and localized than widespread. Various objections were made on the side of morals and religion. As early as 1811 the students of Transylvania University debated with other persons¹³ in public prints the question of the immoral influence of the stage.

Plays were accused of licentiousness and sensuality, and players were believed to live immoral lives. An offence by an actor was very likely to bring censure upon the entire company and, perhaps, the profession. A common complaint was that when actors came to town, the community became demoralized; particular objection was made to what went on outside the¹⁴ theatre. Continuous and bitter war was waged against all theatricals, particularly against professionals.

Eager to keep the public on their side, theatrical managers fought back in their own way. They used every available means to defend the stage and keep the good will of the people. The numerous benefits given for various worthy causes probably did much to keep the public in sympathy with the theatre and to increase the popularity of the actors. Benefits were given for volunteer soldiers, for the poor, for churches, for students--- even for the Greeks, for draining the ponds in the town, and for the marine hospital.¹⁵

¹³ Rusk, op. cit., p. 434.

¹⁴ Hornblow, op. cit., p. 110.

¹⁵ J. Stoddard Johnston, ed., Memorial History of Louisville from its First Settlement to the year 1896 (Chicago, American Biographical Publishing Co., 1896), I, 64.

The steps taken by the towns in their regulation of the theatres and in the fees imposed give perhaps the best reflection of the attitude of the Western people toward the merits or evils of the drama. Almost always there was some kind of license fee required, although the early companies at Lexington were not directly taxed. The usual course followed was for the manager to give a benefit performance at certain intervals. It was several years after the introduction of theatricals at Lexington that regular fees were charged.¹⁶ The pioneer companies were treated more leniently, perhaps with the idea of encouraging their return. At any rate, the city authorities of Lexington were not very severe in their regulations, and managers were privileged individuals for a while.

Louisville was perhaps even more lenient in its attitude. The early fee of three dollars for each performance enacted in 1809 was left to the discretionary powers of the city officials two years later.¹⁷ These officials, as those in Lexington, were rather lax in the exercise of their powers. Samuel Drake and his company, appearing in Louisville from 1816 on, were not taxed heavily, and they rarely paid any taxes in money. Drake, too, now and then gave benefits instead of paying in money a license fee. The first of these benefits was probably given in 1817, and by 1824 they had become¹⁸ quite numerous, given for many of the causes listed above. Drake was a very popular actor and manager, and his benefits, usually given at dull seasons, profited him as well as the city and kept the authorities on good

¹⁶ Rush, op. cit., pp. 435-436.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 437.

¹⁸ Johnston, op. cit., p. 64.

terms with the actors. Rush says that it is clear that Louisville was less
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severe in its restrictions than Cincinnati.

The attitude of authorities in the few smaller towns that were scenes of theatrical performances early in the century may be guessed by the enthusiasm of the residents about shows.

Undoubtedly, Kentucky early accepted and welcomed the theatre. It became a center of activity about which the professional theatrical life of the West revolved. Managers took their companies to Cincinnati, Nashville, St. Louis, New Orleans, and other places for engagements, but most of them kept an interest in Kentucky unless driven out by rivals. In fact, the rivalry of various managers for supremacy in this state furnishes an interesting part of early theatrical history. The early-Kentucky theatre was, to many of the people of the state, not an evil to be despised but a center of culture - the best that was offered to them.

CHAPTER II

AMATEUR THEATRICALS

Very few facts concerning amateur theatricals in Kentucky have as yet come to light, but there is some evidence of their existence shortly before the end of the eighteenth century. The early Kentucky newspapers are almost the only source of information concerning the performances, and as they did not give much space in their slender columns to actors and acting, early theatrical news is not very abundant.¹ The earliest notices found in these papers indicate that amateur performances were being given in Lexington as early as 1799. Beginning at six o'clock on the first of March in that year, students at Transylvania University were to present the comedy of The Busy Body and the farce Love à la Mode.² On the evening of the fifth of March there were presented to the public at the Court House in the same town a comedy in five acts, He Would Be a Soldier, and a farce, All the World's a Stage.³ As no mention of professional actors was made in the advertisement, it seems likely that this performance also was given by amateurs, but the presentation at the Court House makes it appear that the players were not students of Transylvania. A promise made in the advertisement of additions of scenery indicates that these were not the first theatricals given there. In fact, one historian says that a performance was

¹ Hornblow, op. cit., pp. 23-24.

² Kentucky Gazette, February 28, 1799.

³ Ibid.

held in the Court House in 1799,⁴ but the issues of the Kentucky Gazette of that year carry no advertisement of one. However, as has been mentioned above, newspaper advertisements were few. On November 21, 1799, plays were again given at the Court House. These were The West Indian, a comedy in five acts, and The Citizen, a farce in two acts.⁵ The programs were all very long; two plays were given at each performance, and most of the entertainments began at six o'clock.

Lexington had a place of amusement as early as 1797, but this was an exhibition room used for performances of wire-dancing, balancing, and tumbling,⁶ and it is not likely that theatricals were performed there. Presumably plays continued to be given at Transylvania University and at the Court House until about 1801, after which time "the Theatre" was used.⁷ Plays were given there during 1801 and 1802. After 1802 interest in theatricals seems to have waned for several years, and little has been discovered concerning them before 1808. In October of that year a new theatre was opened, with Noble Luke Usher, a Kentuckian who had acted at various points in the East and who was later to have an important part in Kentucky theatricals, as owner and manager.⁸ The characters were performed by the Thespian Society. A new interest was taken in the theatre, and

⁴ Ranck, op. cit., p. 203.

⁵ Kentucky Gazette, November 14 and 21, 1799.

⁶ Ibid., June 3, 1797.

⁷ Rusk, op. cit., p. 353.

⁸ Dunlap, op. cit., p. 548.

amateur performances thrived until the coming of professional companies.⁹ During this period performances were given by the Thespian Society, the Military Society, the Roscian Society, and the students of Transylvania University.¹⁰ After the arrival of professional actors amateurs performed with less and less frequency. Mention might be made of the performance on May 30, 1812, of John Bull, a comedy, by Thespian amateurs of the "Old Infantry" Company in honor of the Lexington volunteers in the war against England."¹¹ On April 26, 1815, a society of young gentlemen of Lexington gave for benevolent purposes a comedy called Honey Moon.¹² It is likely that most of the amateur performances from this time on were given for particular causes, such as the two mentioned above, and that professional actors gradually took the places of amateurs.

It is probable that amateur theatricals in Louisville did not begin as early as they did in Lexington, and recorded facts concerning them are fewer. The people of the Falls did, however, evince an interest in shows; and, as early as 1808, Louisville had a theatre.¹³ Although this theatre

⁹ See Zadok Cramer, The Navigator (Cramer, Spear, and Eichbaum, 1808), Appendix, p. 242. Cramer says, "The town has a public theatre and a company of actors; these keep the gay part of the town lively, and sometimes raise the dull-spirited."

¹⁰ Rusk, op. cit., p. 354.

¹¹ Ranck, op. cit., p. 204.

¹² The Reporter (Lexington), April 26, 1815.

¹³ Benjamin Casseday, The History of Louisville from Its Earliest Settlement Till the Year 1852 (Louisville, Hall and Brother, 1852), p. 116.

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was little better than a barn, its existence and the organization of a
 Dramatic Institution by a company of citizens about the year 1808¹⁵ indi-
 cate that the community had an interest in amateur theatricals. But it is
 difficult either to prove or to disprove the existence of an amateur
 organization for any length of time during this period. One writer says
 that the establishment erected was gradually allowed to sink into nothing-
 ness for lack of capable management,¹⁶ but another states that private
 theatricals "were long and staple diversions of the Falls."¹⁷ The evidence
 is not conclusive, and it is likely that the coming of professionals crowded
 out amateur performances here as in Lexington.

No doubt amateur theatricals gained a foothold in smaller towns of
 Kentucky, and plays were very likely numerous. This form of entertainment
 was undoubtedly popular in early Kentucky, not only with those who were
 the actors but also with those who were only spectators.

¹⁴ Henry McMurtrie, Sketches of Louisville and Its Environs (Louisville,
 printed by S. Penn. jun., Main-street, 1819), p. 126.

¹⁵ The Louisville Directory, for 1808, p. 189.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Gray, op. cit., p. 27.

CHAPTER III

THE EARLIEST PROFESSIONAL COMPANIES

In spite of the fact that they were extremely popular both with the actors and with the audiences, amateur theatricals did not long remain the chief attraction of the early Kentucky theatre. Very early, professional actors began to wander into the West; often strolling companies of a few performers, coming down the river on flat boats, ventured a brief visit to convenient towns. Usually they were well received and found their visit a remunerative venture. But these earliest adventurers, finding no regular companies, very poor makeshifts for theatres, and scanty accommodations, did not, as a rule, tarry long in the West. In his record of the early Western theatre Indiew refuses to recognize as a professional company any group of actors who appeared before that which came with Saniel Drake in 1815.¹ However, the fact is that as early as 1810, little more than ten years after amateur theatricals had begun to thrive in Lexington, a professional troupe sizeable enough to be called a company made its appearance in Kentucky and established a circuit here. This was a company of performers from Montreal and Quebec organized by Mr. Douglas and brought to Lexington by the middle of December, 1810. An enthusiastic newspaper account indicates the welcome the company received:

"It is with sincere pleasure we are at length enabled to congratulate the lovers of the Drama, and the fashionables of

¹Indiew says (op. cit., p. 86), "For a few years prior to 1815, Kentucky and its neighbor State, Ohio, had been visited at long intervals with strolling parties of two or three performers, but no circuit had been established, nor had any well-organized company ventured thus far west."

the town, upon the arrival of Mr. Douglas, with a company of theatrical performers from Montreal and Quebec... The citizens of Lexington and Frankfort will be gratified during the present winter with their performances, which in addition to the usual amusements of assemblies etc. will contribute much to dispel the gloom of the season."²

The tragedy of Jane Shore was proposed for the first performance in Lexington, which was to take place at some time during the first week. The newspaper writer predicts that the company "will no doubt meet with ample remuneration."³

Some of the actors during the first engagements were Mr. Douglas, Mr. and Mrs. Turner, Mr. and Mrs. Cipriani, Mr. Williams, Mr. Jones, and Mr. Kennedy.⁴ The personnel of the company did not remain the same for long periods; actors would become dissatisfied and leave, and new ones would take their places. It is not surprising that there was a scarcity of women in the company.⁵

The programs, like those of amateur performers, were long. There were two plays given each evening, one a favorite farce, which came after the main attraction. Fancy dances, recitations, and comic songs were given between the plays. The doors of the theatre were opened at half past six o'clock, and the programs began early in order to give sufficient time.

² Kentucky Gazette, December 18, 1810.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., December 25, 1810; January 29 and February 19, 1811.

⁵ See John Melish, Travels in the United States of America (Philadelphia, Thomas and George Palmer, 1813), II, 136. Melish, who visited Lexington in 1811, says, "We went in a body to the theatre. The performers acted very well, but there was a deficiency of actresses, and one of the men had to play a female character, which did not suit my taste at all."

The company performed in Lexington until the last of December,⁶ going from there to Frankfort, where they remained a month. The date of the Frankfort engagement was probably determined by the time of the meeting of the Kentucky legislature.

While the company was playing in Frankfort, the Lexington Theatre, which was still controlled by Noble Luke Usher, was considerably altered. It was repainted and redecorated by Mr. Jones during January and made ready for the return of the players at the end of the month. On January 30, 1811, the theatre was opened for the second season at Lexington, the days of performance to be Wednesday and Saturday. The program of the first evening consisted of the "celebrated comedy" of Lover's Vows and the "much admired farce" of Love à la Mode. Previous to the play there was to be an "occasional address in character by Mr. Kennedy."⁷

If an article in the Gazette can be taken as an indication of the general attitude of the citizens toward the company, it is evident that Lexington enjoyed and appreciated the efforts of the actors. The contributor praises highly the extensive stage knowledge and dramatic talents of Mrs. Turner and says that her representation of "Little Pickle" in Smell'd Child was "past all praise." Mr. Jones, Mr. Kennedy, and Mrs. Cipriani are lauded, and Mr. Douglas is spoken of as such an old and general favorite that any tribute to him is unnecessary. The respectable size of the audiences, sometimes even in bad weather, is mentioned, too. Another contributor in the

⁶Kentucky Gazette, December 25, 1810.

⁷Ibid., January 29, 1811.

⁸Ibid., February 19, 1811.

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same issue speaks of the performance "which gave such universal satisfaction last Saturday night" and encloses some verses eulogizing it.

Sometime during the spring of 1811 the Ciprianis and the Turners withdrew from the company,¹⁰ but this loss had been repaired by September, when the troupe reopened at Lexington. A Mr. Huntington, from the New York and Charleston theatres, made his first appearance with the company as Lieutenant Worthington in Poor Gentleman, a comedy by Coleman. Mrs. Cipriani reappeared, for the first time that season, as Miss Lucrecia MacTab.¹¹ Mr. Vos and Mr. Marsh were also listed among the players.¹¹

Upon closing this season in Lexington, the company again went to Frankfort, where the managers were creditably spoken of and "the exertions of the company were duly appreciated."¹² By the middle of February, the time of the return of the actors to Lexington, further improvements had been made in the Lexington Theatre.¹³ Additional doors had been opened, and other arrangements to meet the approbation of the public had been made. The managers respectfully invited interested citizens to examine the building.¹⁴

It is altogether likely that by this time the company had established a definite circuit in Kentucky, including Lexington, Frankfort, and Louisville. A lengthy program, including The Jew or Benevolent Hebrew, a comedy in five acts; Blue Devils, a farce in one act; and Yankee Chronology, a

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Rush, op. cit., p. 365.

¹¹ Kentucky Gazette, September 15, 1811.

¹² Ibid., February 18, 1812.

¹³ Ibid., February 11 and 18, 1812.

¹⁴ Ibid., February 18, 1812.

new piece, which was presented in Frankfort on December 28, 1813, was probably given by these players.¹⁵ Undoubtedly the company made at least occasional visits to Louisville.¹⁶

On June 1, 1813, Noble Luke Usher, the manager of the theatre, announced to the public that he had relinquished management and had rented the theatre to the company. The proceeds in the future were to be equally divided among the parties concerned, the managers pledging themselves to united endeavors to please the audiences.¹⁷

At some time after this the control of the Lexington Theatre passed into the hands of Luke Usher, uncle of Noble Luke Usher,¹⁸ but in June, 1815, William Turner announced that he had taken the theatre of Mr. Usher and that he would make every effort in his power to deserve the patronage of the public, intending to spare no expense in securing "performers of the first celebrity on the continent."¹⁹ The first performance was to be given June 14.²⁰ Turner's company continued to play at intervals throughout the fall of 1815, probably through October. Players appearing in Wives As They Were and Maids As They Are on June 22 were Collins, Morgan,

¹⁵ The Palladium (Frankfort), December 25, 1813.

¹⁶ See Melish, op. cit., p. 186.

¹⁷ Kentucky Gazette, June 1, 1813.

¹⁸ Noble Luke Usher died on his way from New York to Kentucky in the fall of 1814. See Ludlow, op. cit., p. 5.

¹⁹ Kentucky Gazette, June 12, 1815.

²⁰ The Reporter (Lexington), June 14, 1815.

Lucas, Johnson, Cargill, Anderson, Ludlow, Beale, Mrs. Barrett, Mrs.

Milner, and Mrs. Turner.²³ Numerous plays were given during the next few weeks, Mr. Blissett appearing as Tony Lumpkin in She Stoops to Conquer.

For a time it seemed as if Turner were secure in the managership of the Lexington Theatre, but Luke Usher evidently had long had an understanding with Samuel Drake,²⁴ who was then on his way to Kentucky with a company of actors from New York.²⁵ During June, 1815, Drake made announcements to the public that he had purchased Mr. Usher's interest in the Kentucky theatres and that he was about to commence a journey to the West to reform the theatres and to establish Western drama on a firm foundation.²⁶ Thus the war between the rival managers for control of the Kentucky theatres began. Turner insisted that he had contracted with Usher for the Frankfort, Louisville, and Lexington theatres, having abandoned every other prospect for the purpose of living in Frankfort with his family. "Mr. Usher," he says,

"having refused him possession of the Frankfort & Louisville Theatres, he has commenced an action of damages against him, and trusts that a Jury will do him justice, and prove by the verdict that contracts are not to be violated with impunity."²⁷

²¹ This was not R. M. Ludlow, author of Dramatic Life as I Found It. See his own account of his activities at this time, op. cit., pp. 6-31.

²² The Reporter (Lexington), June 21, 1815.

²³ Ibid., August 9, 1815.

²⁴ Ludlow, op. cit., p. 5.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 6-76.

²⁶ Rush, op. cit., p. 269.

²⁷ The Reporter (Lexington), October 28, 1815.

Regardless of the outcome of the suit, Samuel Drake, who arrived in
Kentucky in December, 1815,²⁸ gained complete control of the Lexington,
Louisville, and Frankfort circuit, forcing his predecessors either to disband
or to hunt new fields of activity. The professional companies which had
flourished in Kentucky from 1810 until 1815 were completely crowded out by
this new monarch of the theatre.

²⁸

Ludlow, op. cit., p. 81.

CHAPTER IV

THE DRAKE COMPANY

It was in Albany, New York, in the fall of 1814 that Samuel Drake first began to take an active interest in Western theatricals.¹ At that time Noble Luke Usher, formerly an actor in Philadelphia, New York, and Boston and at this time in control of the theatres at Lexington, Frankfort, and Louisville, presented himself to Mr. Bernard, then manager of the Albany theatre, and expressed a desire to play an engagement of a few nights. During those nights Usher disclosed his real purpose in coming East to Samuel Drake, who was at that time stage manager of the Albany Theatre; this was to secure a company of players for a circuit which he wished to establish in Kentucky. Drake, immediately interested in the idea, promised to form a company and bring it to the West in the spring.

On the way back to Kentucky Usher died, and his theatres fell into the hands of his uncle, Luke Usher. Luke Usher opened a correspondence with Drake which resulted in an agreement that the latter should become lessee of the Lexington, Frankfort, and Louisville theatres and manage them on his own account. By the beginning of 1815 Drake was looking around for actors and actresses courageous enough to risk their fortunes in the new West. They were not easily found, for the difficulties were numerous and certain, and to many of the players there could be no advantage. Experienced actors, holding comfortable positions in Eastern theatres, were unwilling to listen to what they considered a wild scheme, and Drake had considerable

¹ The following account is drawn from Ludlow (op. cit., pp. 5-78), who was a member of the Drake Company.

difficulty in finding the persons required to make up a company. The members of his own family were all actors and willing to go, but others were needed. N.M. Ludlow, at that time a player of minor parts, was offered an opportunity to go on this adventure, and he gladly accepted. A few others were recruited, and the company began to make plans for departure.

In May, 1815, Ludlow, preceding the remainder of the company by a few days, left Albany to arrange for a performance in the first town at which Drake wished to play on the way to Kentucky. The entire company was composed of only eleven persons-- Samuel Drake, Sr., the manager; his sons, Samuel Drake, Jr., Alexander Drake, and James Drake; his daughters, Miss Martha Drake and Miss Julia Drake; Miss Fanny Denny, who was later the famous Mrs. Alexander Drake; Mr. Lewis, the stage carpenter; Mrs. Lewis; Joe Tracy, man of all work; and N.M. Ludlow, who later became a prominent Western theatrical manager. Other actors were expected to join the company at Pittsburgh and Frankfort.

With his strong array of family talent, Drake was an independent and powerful manager, and several members of the troupe became quite famous in Western theatricals. Drake himself was born in England and was actor and manager of some country theatres in the West of England before coming to the United States. He married in England a Miss Fisher, who was a member of a theatrical family. The Drake family came to America about 1810, remained in Boston a while, and then joined the company of John Bernard at Albany, New York. Mrs. Drake died in Albany several months before the company started to Kentucky.² "Old Drake" was at least a fairly good actor and took parts

²Ludlow, op. cit., p. 363.

in the plays, especially in such characters as showed off his fine figure and make-up. He was a good fencer, and the audiences were always pleased to see him in combat, especially with the elder Booth.³ He was long a popular and prominent actor and manager in theatricals of the West, living in Kentucky most of the time until his death.

Samuel Drake, Jr., was a violin-player in the orchestra of the Albany Theatre. According to Ludlow, he was a handsome fellow and a very sociable and pleasant companion, easily making friends. After his father organized the company, young Drake was alternately actor and orchestra leader. In the latter capacity he was perhaps more valuable, as orchestra leaders were scarce in those days. He died in Cincinnati when he was thirty.⁴

Alexander Drake was a comedian and an immense favorite in the West for many years. His particular line was "country boys" and singing low comedy, and in this few surpassed him. He later became the husband of Miss Frances Ann Denny, a member of the company. Aleck Drake was as popular among early Kentucky theatre-goers as were his father and brother.⁵

The third son of the manager was James Drake, who never became a prominent actor. He was a lawyer by profession, but he took more interest in poetry than in law.⁶ He was also a writer of songs, generally of a sentimental nature, and rarely took part in the plays except to sing to a guitar accompaniment.⁷ His wife was a member of a prominent Kentucky family, and

³ Johnston, op.cit., II, 329.

⁴ Op.cit., pp. 363-364.

⁵ Ibid., p. 364.

⁶ Ibid., p. 365.

⁷ Johnston, op.cit., II, 329.

he spent the latter part of his life in Louisville.

Martha Drake, the older of the two girls, married an Englishman and retired from the stage soon after reaching Kentucky.⁸

Julia Drake was the brightest star of the family, very beautiful and talented. Ludlow describes her as "a perfect specimen of the ancient Italian beauty -- dark hair and long, dark eyelashes." She was a great favorite in all the Western theatres, and her fame even spread to the East. Julia Drake's second husband was Edwin Dean, and she became the mother of the talented and famous Julia Dean.⁹

Frances Ann Denny, who later became Mrs. Alexander Drake, was a native of Schenectady, New York. When she joined Drake's Company, she was a novice, but soon her rare gifts as an actress were apparent, and she became a great favorite. A few years after coming to Kentucky, she returned to the East for a while but later returned to the South and West for engagements. Mrs. Drake was a talented actress, and she gained much more than local fame. The latter years of her life were spent in retirement on a farm near Louisville.¹⁰

Ludlow was a valuable member of the company until 1817, when he began his long career in Western theatricals as manager. The other members were of less importance.

Mr. Drake did not wish to reach Kentucky until late in the fall; so he decided to prolong his journey by performing at certain towns on his way

⁸ Ludlow, op. cit., p. 365.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 366-367.

down. His plan was to travel northwest in the state of New York, then southwest, descending by boat to Pittsburgh, where he was to perform until the assembling of the state legislature in Kentucky, early in December. The means of transportation was a road-wagon and a light spring wagon which was to be used for the convenience of the ladies of the company; the others were expected to walk the greater part of the way, as the scenery had to be hauled. Concerning the stage facilities, Ludlow says,

"The stage adjuncts consisted of but six scenes, a wood, street, parlor, kitchen, palace, and garden. The wings, or side scenes, consisted of three of a side, to be stationary in one sense, but to be so arranged with flaps or aprons as to present, when required, an out-door view adapted to correspond with garden or street; an in-door view, to suit parlor or palace; with a third, to match the kitchen. The proscenium was a painted drapery, made so as to be expanded or contracted to suit the dimensions of the places occupied by our performances. These and a neat drop-curtain, and green baize carpet, constituted our stage facilities. The scenery could be put in place, or taken down and packed, in two or three hours."¹¹

With this array the troupe traveled to the waters of the Allegheny River, where they disposed of their wagons and horses in favor of a flat-bottomed boat, in which they traveled down the river to Pittsburgh. This mode of traveling was no more comfortable or convenient than the first, and the players were quite glad to reach Pittsburgh about the middle of August, 1815. From this time until early in November Drake had his actors perform in Pittsburgh, their season ending with a benefit for Mr. Drake. The next stop was to be at Frankfort, Kentucky, which was four hundred miles farther.

11

Ibid., pp. 7-8.

Another "broad-horn" boat was secured, and the company set out down the Ohio. A week later they reached Limestone, or Maysville, as it later was known, and from here the remainder of the journey had to be made in a wagon. The exact time required for the trip is not known, but Ludlow says that except for its being a very slow journey, it was not such a disagreeable one. There were few inns on the road, but the people were kind enough to take the actors in for a trifling charge, and their hospitality is described as more genuine and unostentatious than that of any other state with which the writer was acquainted.

While he was in the East, Noble Luke Usher had engaged some professional actors who came on to Kentucky before they learned of his death. Upon hearing that Mr. Drake was negotiating for the theatres, they decided to remain and attempt securing engagements with him. They were not disappointed. Several players joined Drake's little band in Kentucky: John Vaughan, leading man; Henry Vaughan, his brother; Frank Blissett, an excellent actor in "low comedy" and in "Frenchmen"; Tom Jefferson, oldest son of Joseph Jefferson, the celebrated comedian; and Douglas¹² (possibly the Douglas who brought the first theatrical troupe to Kentucky).

The first Kentucky theatrical season of the Drake Company opened in Frankfort early in December, 1815, with Coleman's play of The Mountaineers and the farce The Poor Soldier. When the farce came on, the applause¹³ showed that the new players had made a "hit." For several weeks the company continued a successful season in Frankfort, playing to well-filled

¹²Ludlow (op.cit., p.81) gives this man's name as James Douglass, the son of the early American theatre manager.

¹³Ibid., pp.81-82.

houses of the best educated and most respectable people of the town and country around. The newly acquired members of the company proved to be valuable additions. Mr. Blissett was particularly praised,¹⁴ and he remained with the company for a few years. Misunderstandings between Mr. Jefferson and the manager resulted in the former's leaving the company at the end of the first season.¹⁵ By the first of March, 1816, Samuel Drake had concluded his first theatrical engagement in Kentucky, where he was long supreme as a manager.

From Frankfort, where Drake had chosen to play first because of the meeting of the legislature, the company went to Louisville. The people were "on the tiptoe of expectation," but the theatre was "not in a condition to be occupied; it was dark, dingy, and dirty." The scenery was badly painted; the auditorium was done in dismal colors and very poorly lighted. For about two weeks Mr. Drake and his son Aleck, enlisting the aid of John Vos, a Louisville painter, worked to get the theatre in condition.¹⁶ The only theatre in Louisville at that time stood on Jefferson Street between Third and Fourth Streets;¹⁷ it probably belonged to a man named Tyler.¹⁸

After about two weeks the season opened, and the actors played for

¹⁴ See Sol Smith, The Theatrical Apprenticeship (Philadelphia, Carey and Hart, 1846), p. 28. Smith says, "I saw Blissett in nearly all of his best characters, and a most admirable actor he was." Smith later joined the company.

¹⁵ Ludlow, op.cit., p. 83.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 88. According to McMurtrie (op.cit., p. 126), it was little better than a barn.

¹⁷ Rusk, op.cit., p. 405.

¹⁸ Ludlow, op.cit., p. 89.

several weeks to audiences which were enthusiastic and well pleased with their performances. The Louisville people were described as "prosperous, gay, and fond of theatrical amusements."¹⁹ Drake's first season there probably ended May 14, 1816,²⁰ and his next stand was to be at Lexington.

Lexington was at that time the seat of learning and of aristocracy in Kentucky, and it had been the first center of theatrical activity in the West. Drake had postponed his visit to this city until early summer because he had been advised that Frankfort could not support a theatrical company except at the time of the meeting of the legislature and that Louisville should be visited in the early spring. Journeying in the usual way, the troupe left Louisville and arrived in Lexington between the middle and the last of May.²¹ Here they were surprised to find the poorest kind of theatre, a room fitted up for dramatic performances in the second story of a building that had been a brewery belonging to Luke Usher.²² It was about seventy to eighty feet in length by twenty-five to thirty feet in width. The seats were constructed on the amphitheatre plan, the ones at the back being reached by a sloping platform at one side. The stock of scenery was limited and not well painted. The building stood on an abruptly rising piece of ground, and the audience entered from a street nearly on a

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Rusk, op.cit., p. 371. From The Western Courier, May 9, 1816.

²¹ Kentucky Gazette, May 20, 1816. Ludlow (op.cit., p. 89) gives the date as about the middle of June, but newspaper notices indicate that the company was performing in Lexington during May.

²² This was probably what was advertised as the "New Theatre" in 1808. See Dunlap (op.cit., p. 348).

level with the floor of the second story.²³

On May 21, 1816, Mr. Drake opened his first theatrical season at Lexington²⁴ to an appreciative audience. According to a newspaper account the company was welcomed;

"A company of comedians under the direction of Mr. Drake, are now performing in this town. At Frankfort and Louisville they met with good encouragement, and we doubt not their reception here will equal their expectations. Considering the season of the year the theatre has been well attended since their arrival, and the audiences have been pleased with the exertions of the company."²⁵

Throughout May and June the players performed in Lexington, Othello being given on June 5.²⁶ In July the extremely warm weather made the badly-ventilated theatre too uncomfortable, and the manager concluded to close for a summer vacation, planning to return for a fall engagement.²⁷ With the close of the engagement, Drake completed the first tour of his Kentucky circuit, and he was well on the way toward the establishment of his regime in this state.

During the summer of 1816 the members of the company planned a "gagging-scheme," that is, a tour of some of the neighboring towns around Lexington. They stopped first at Harrodsburg Springs but could not procure a place in which to perform; so the troupe moved on to Danville, where they performed in the court house for several days. Leaving Danville, the actors moved

²³ Ludlow, op. cit., p. 90.

²⁴ Kentucky Gazette, May 20, 1816.

²⁵ The Reporter (Lexington), May 31, 1816.

²⁶ Ibid., June 5, 1816.

²⁷ Ludlow, op. cit., p. 91.

on to the town of Paris, where they performed until time to return to Lexington for the opening of the fall season. It seems that the people of these towns, also, were pleased with the company.²⁸

The second Lexington engagement opened in September, 1816. A few additions, "stock" performers, were made to the company, and for the first time they had a "star." This was a Mr. Joshua Collins, who afterwards became a partner in the firm of Collins and Jones, which managed for a while some of the Western theatres. According to Ludlow, Collins was not very attractive in appearance, but as a portrayer of comic old men he was very good. This season in Lexington must have been a remunerative one, for when it closed near the end of November, the manager, without being asked to do so, increased Ludlow's salary.²⁹

From Lexington the company went to Frankfort about two weeks before the meeting of the legislature to see whether the town could support them without the aid of strangers. They found that it could not; the first week paid, but the second did not. However, the players were well received again.³⁰

During April and May of 1817 the company played in Louisville a second time, and it was at the end of this season that Ludlow and several of the other players set out on what was termed a "commonwealth" party, an independent venture, toward Nashville, playing in several Kentucky towns along the way.³¹ This was the beginning of Ludlow's managerial career. After this

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 97-99.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 101.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 101-102.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 105-112.

he was with Drake only at intervals.

Meanwhile Drake continued to establish himself in his Kentucky circuit, proving his superiority over various competitors who appeared from time to time. From about 1819 on, Louisville seems to have been the center of his activities, and he was a popular and successful manager in this city. During the period of his efficient managership he did much to improve and raise the standards of the theatre and to raise the level of the public taste.

Drake came into control of the old theatre in Louisville in 1818 and altered it considerably. It was described as a handsome brick building of three stories, divided into a pit, two tiers of boxes, and a gallery, and capable of containing in all about eight hundred persons.³³ From time to time various improvements were made.³⁴ A British traveller comments in 1830;

✓ "The theatre at Louisville was under repair when I was there, but though in an unfinished state, it was open one

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Colonel John Thompson Gray says (op.cit., p.120), "Mr. Drake's theatre was one of the fixed institutions of the town, in which all took great pride. No company of players ever received a heartier ovation....The public did not tire of their performances...The actor's vocation rose in public esteem."

33

McMurtrie, op.cit., p.126. McMurtrie also speaks of... "Mr. Drake, whose unceasing endeavors, to merit the approbation of the public, will no doubt meet with a liberal recompense, in its patronage."

34

Gray (op.cit., p.118) says that "this new theatre had been again closed for repairs (probably in 1819)." The Louisville Directory, for the Year 1832, p.139, says that the building was torn down in 1828 and a new one built by Drake and called the City Theatre. According to Fusk (op.cit. p.405), this is not confirmed by theatrical notices in the press. The date was probably 1830.

evening while I remained... This theatre is on a very improved construction in one respect, that it has a totally separate entrance for ladies who are not received in society." ³⁵

This building was described as about one hundred feet in length, fifty-two feet in width, and about thirty-four feet in height. It had three ranges of boxes, a pit, and a saloon. It seated about seven hundred persons. ³⁶

Manager Drake introduced many actors and actresses in his Kentucky theatres who later gained considerable prominence among stage artists. Some of these were members of his own family. Alexander Drake gained much celebrity in the West and was not unknown in the East. Miss Denny, who became Mrs. Alexander Drake, became the most famous and the most popular of the little band that came to Kentucky in 1815. She was a recognized star. ³⁷ Julia Drake, a daughter of the manager, also gained prominence. She was the mother of Julia Dean, an actress of extraordinary talent. Thomas Abthorpe Cooper, Charles Kean, Clara Fisher, Julius Brutus Booth, Edwin Forrest, ³⁸ and Thomas D. Rice ³⁹ were other famous artists appearing under the managership of Drake.

Although Louisville was the center of Drake's activity, he continued

³⁵ James Stuart, Three Years in North America (Edinburgh, Robert Cadell, 1833), II, 186.

³⁶ The Louisville Directory, for 1832, p. 139.

³⁷ See Stuart, op. cit., p. 186. Stuart states, "I had the pleasure of seeing Mrs. Drake, the best tragic actress in the United States, and who would be reckoned a good actress anywhere."

³⁸ Rusk, op. cit., pp. 398-399.

³⁹ Sol Smith, Theatrical Management (N.Y., Harper and Bros., 1868), p. 65.

to hold on to his old circuit of Lexington, Frankfort, and Louisville. Ludlow, who was in Louisville in 1826 and 1828, says that in these years Drake was continuing his old circuit in these cities.⁴⁰ In all probability he retained his hold as long as he was active in Kentucky theatricals, perhaps relinquishing his interests in Frankfort and Lexington first and remaining the most important figure in Louisville theatricals until 1833.⁴¹ But the old manager (according to Ludlow, he was about sixty-five by this time) retired from the business to spend the remainder of his life on a farm in Kentucky,⁴² and the theatre lost one of its wisest and most successful leaders.

⁴⁰ Op. cit., pp. 274 and 305.

⁴¹ Rusk, op. cit., p. 380.

⁴² Op. cit., p. 363.

CHAPTER V

OTHER PROFESSIONAL COMPANIES

Although the Drake company was the most important among pioneering theatrical companies in Kentucky, there were others appearing from time to time. Some of these provided keen competition for manager Drake and for each other, but many were of little importance.

Ludlow, whose connection with the Drake Company has been described, became prominent as a manager in Southern theatricals, appearing in Kentucky at intervals. In the summer of 1817 he withdrew from the Drake company and started out with a number of other players on an independent venture. The players headed for Nashville, where it was said theatricals were wanted, planning to play in Kentucky towns on the way.¹

The first stopping place was Elizabethtown, then about a day's travel from Louisville. The only hotel of the town was secured for the performances. Because of the limited number of players,² only farces were given, but the people of the town seemed pleased.

From Elizabethtown the actors went to Russellville, where they were welcomed by the citizens. Hopkinsville was the next stop, but no place to perform could be secured here, and the company went on its way. No other Kentucky towns were visited by Ludlow and his associates during this tour.

During the next few years Kentucky did not come within the range of

¹ Ludlow, *op. cit.*, pp. 107-110. The story of Ludlow's managerial activities is drawn chiefly from his own account.

² Those in the group were John Vaughan, Henry Vaughan, A. J. Phillips, N. L. Ludlow, a man by the name of Sainbridge, Mrs. John Vaughan, and the woman who was to become Ludlow's wife.

Ludlow's theatrical activities as manager and joint-manager in the South and West. Nashville, New Orleans, and St. Louis were his chief interests. However, in 1829 he reappeared in Kentucky, opening a new theatre at Louisville in that year and playing there until the spring of 1830.³ In the fall of 1831 Ludlow was again in Louisville in charge of a company for James Caldwell, who was another prominent Southern and Western actor-manager. According to Ludlow, it was during this season that the drama of Rip Van Winkle was first given to the people of Louisville. Charles B. Parsons (afterwards the Reverend Mr. Parsons) was the first Rip. At the end of this season Thomas D. Rice, who became famous as "Jim Crow," joined the company.⁴ From this time on to the close of his career Ludlow's activities were confined almost entirely to cities outside of Kentucky, and his brief excursions into this state were insignificant.

During his theatrical career Ludlow was actor, independent manager of his own company, and joint manager; and he was associated with many of the men who were most prominent in Kentucky theatricals at this time.

Joshua Collins, who, according to Ludlow, was the first star of the Drake Company, afterward became the partner of William Jones; and these two gentlemen, as the firm of Collins and Jones, managed for a while some of the Western theatres.⁵ In the fall of 1821 this company

³ Ibid., p. 368. According to Rusk (op.cit., pp. 383-384) the season began on November 11, 1829, and lasted nearly five months.

⁴ Op.cit., pp. 390-392.

⁵ Ibid., p. 100.

played in Lexington.⁶ The 1822 - 1823 Lexington season of Collins and Jones is interesting because of the appearance there of Edwin Forrest, who was at that time an obscure actor. It has been said that Forrest contracted with Collins and Jones in 1822 for a Western tour, for which he was to receive eight dollars a week and to play any part.⁷ This company was in Louisville in 1823, but some of its players had withdrawn and gone to Cincinnati.⁸ This group included Forrest, who is mentioned as playing in Cincinnati during the fall of 1823 but returning to Lexington in the fall to join again Collins and Jones.⁹ This appearance was apparently the last this company made in Kentucky.

Another unusual character and recorder of his own experiences in an interesting way was Sol Smith, who, after seeing the Drake company perform at Albany, followed the troupe to Kentucky,¹⁰ where he later became both actor and manager. His first theatrical experiences were as actor in the Drake Company. It was at the close of the 1823-1824 Lexington season of Collins and Jones that Smith assembled a group of players and started out as manager,¹¹ going to Cincinnati to begin his career. But by 1826 he was back in Kentucky, where he formed a small traveling party visiting

⁶ Kentucky Reporter, October 15, 1821.

⁷ Hornblow, II, p. 33.

⁸ Smith, The Theatrical Apprenticeship, p. 49.

⁹ Ibid., p. 51.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 14-15.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 54-125. Smith says that he had never thought of becoming manager of a theatre until Jones suggested the idea to him at this time.

smaller towns.¹² The actors proceeded to Georgetown, where they played three or four nights, and from there they went to Paris. Nicholasville was also included in the itinerary. In the summer of 1827 the company again visited small towns, returning to Lexington for an engagement of about three weeks, which was not very successful. Smith says that there was "but one good house and that was when Henry Clay attended the theatre."¹³ Harrodsburg, Versailles, Georgetown, and Shelbyville were some of the other towns visited by Smith and his troupe. At the close of this tour the company disbanded, at least some of the actors joining Caldwell's company at Nashville, and from this time on little is heard of Smith as a manager in Kentucky. As a whole his ventures were not successful.

James Caldwell, another Englishman who became a conspicuous figure in American theatricals, began his career as manager at Columbus, Kentucky, in ¹⁴. However, he soon became important in New Orleans theatricals, devoting most of his time and interests to this city. But he was an energetic and capable manager, and his efforts were not confined solely to the South. In 1831 Caldwell sent Ludlow to Louisville in charge of one of his companies,¹⁵ and in 1832 he was there himself

¹² In Nicholasville the performances were given in a ball room, and the landlord was in the habit of going behind the scenes to witness the performance. Because he was a member of the church, he did not wish to be seen in front.

¹³ Theatrical Apprenticeship, p.122.

¹⁴ Hornblow, op.cit., I, 341.

¹⁵ Ludlow, op.cit., p.389-390.

for about a month.¹⁶ His appearance in this city in the autumn of 1836¹⁷ was likely his last as manager in Kentucky.

J. Purdy Brown, a popular equestrian manager in the South and West who was for a time associated with Ludlow in a combination equestrian and dramatic company, appeared in Kentucky several times from 1830 to about 1834.

There were several minor dramatic companies appearing in Kentucky during the first half of the nineteenth century. Russell and Rowe, Potter and Waters, and Scott and Thorne were the most important of these.¹⁸

The history of early theatrical companies is a story of daring and energetic men, of easily formed and often quickly broken alliances, and of keen and sometimes bitter rivalries. Often the managers were as interesting characters as the actors themselves were.

¹⁶ Rusk, op.cit., p.385.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.387.

¹⁸ Ibid.

CHAPTER VI.

INTERESTING ENGAGEMENTS AND PLAYERS

For several years after their coming to Kentucky the members of the Drake Company, especially those of the family, were the most important and interesting figures in the early theatrical history of this state. Old Drake himself, who has been described as a fairly good actor and a fine-looking man, pleased the people as an actor as well as a manager. Alexander Drake was for many years a great favorite as a comedian. Julia, the younger of the two girls, was a famous beauty, and her popularity in the West was immense. Frances Ann Denny, who became Mrs. Alexander Drake, was perhaps the most gifted of the company, and for many years she was a famous star in the East as well as in the West. These famous players were long a joy to the theatre-loving Kentuckians.

According to Ludlow, the first star to appear under the management of Samuel Drake was Joshua Collins, who later became a member of the theatrical firm of Collins and Jones. In the fall of 1816 Collins came down to Lexington from Cincinnati to play a few nights and have a benefit with the company. He was described as "a passable actor for the backwoods of those days."¹ But Collins did not attain much fame as an actor; it is merely interesting to note that he was one of the early stars.

Erwin Forrest, whose rise from the mediocrity of pioneer theatricals was remarkable, played his first leading part in Lexington in Usher's

¹ Ludlow, op. cit., p. 100.

Theatre. He was brought out by Collins and Jones in 1822. Before this time he had played only minor parts,² and this 1822 season of Collins and Jones is justly famous for having brought into prominence a man who became a great star.

Although the way of traveling was very hard and quite slow, prominent actors and actresses from the East began to appear in Kentucky by the close of the first quarter of the nineteenth century. The system of "starring" was in this way begun. Thomas Abthorpe Cooper appeared in 1822 and returned from time to time.³ His appearance in Lexington at the end of April, 1822, was a great event, and box tickets sold at auction.⁴

During April, 1830, Mrs. Alexander Drake was playing at Louisville. At that time she had, according to a British observer, attained the rank of the best tragic actress in the United States and had become one who would be reckoned a good actress anywhere.⁵ Fifteen years before, she was a novice, making her first theatrical appearances in the original company of Samuel Drake.

Another member of Drake's company who became famous about this time was Thomas D. Rice. In 1830 he was playing for Drake in Louisville and was engaged in composing and arranging his Jim Crow songs, which made him so popular both in this country and in England.⁶ There is more than one story concerning the origin of these famous songs. Ludlow tells an interesting

² Rank, op. cit., p. 204.

³ Rush, op. cit., pp. 398-399.

⁴ Kentucky Reporter, April 22, 1822.

⁵ Stuart, op. cit., p. 106.

⁶ Smith, Theatrical Management, p. 65.

one. According to him, it was during the 1830 spring season of the Louisville Theatre that the idea first occurred to Rice. One morning during a rehearsal in which he had little to do, Mr. Rice was standing at a back door which looked out on the rear of a stable-yard. A negro, cleaning and rubbing down horses, was singing in a clear and melodious voice, which attracted the actor's attention. The song was the negro version of "Jump, Jim Crow." For several days after that he listened to the negro's singing and paid him to sing the song over until he had learned it. About this time Mr. Drake was bringing out a local drama entitled the Rifle, in which Mr. Rice had been cast for a Kentucky cornfield negro. He gained Mr. Drake's reluctant consent to sing his newly acquired negro song, "Jim Crow." The result was that "Jim Crow" ran a play to full houses for many nights which otherwise would probably have been a "dead lock."⁷

These songs were long favorites. One Louisville writer says that the words were seemingly improvised, having new local hits every night. The following lines, referring to a paper war going on daily between the rival editors, Prentice and Shadrack Penn, are given as an average specimen:

"Prentice, though a Yankee, yet shows his taste ain't bad,
For every morning regular he breakfasts on shad."

The great popularity of this song and the usual accompanying dance furnishes a commentary upon the public taste of the time, and it also marks the beginning of the taste for negro melodies which long prevailed.⁸

At the close of the 1831 Louisville season Rice joined Ludlow's

⁷ Ludlow, op.cit., p. 389.

⁸ Gray, op.cit., pp. 129-130.

company. By this time he was known as "Jim Crow" Rice.⁹ Again in June, 1834, he was in Louisville singing his songs with great success. At the close of this engagement he remained in Louisville and was there during the performances of the elder Booth.¹⁰

Junius Brutus Booth, father of Edwin Booth, had begun his visits to Western theatres a few years before this and was immensely popular. He was a man of intense character, with black hair and luminous gray eyes. Booth was a great Shakespearean scholar and actor, and tragedies were his forte. Richard III was probably his favorite.¹¹ He was a particular friend of Samuel Drake, Sr., and the two spent much time together at Drake's home near Louisville.¹² As late as 1838 Booth's popularity was almost unchallenged, and in November, 1838, he played to more spectators than had ever before been in the City Theatre during an equal period of time.¹³

Forrest was in Louisville again in June, 1839, appearing on June 1 as Spartacus in The Gladiator. He was more admired in this character than in any other he played during his engagement, the gigantic proportions of his figure being particularly adapted to the character.¹⁴ In the seventeen years following his Lexington debut Forrest had become a powerful and greatly admired actor. In 1843 a Philadelphia paper, discussing a recent engagement of his in that city, referred to him as "our great national

⁹ Ludlow, op.cit., p. 322.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 416.

¹¹ Johnston, op.cit., II, 329-330.

¹² Ibid., p. 329.

¹³ Rusk, op.cit.

¹⁴ Johnston, op.cit., II, 329.

tragedian."¹⁵

During this time Louisville had been the scene of much theatrical activity. Although other towns in Kentucky continued to maintain theatres and receive visits from professional companies and various stars, Louisville was the center. For a few years before the destruction of the City Theatre by fire in 1843 much of the old glory had departed from it, and it is said that only the most disreputable part of society attended the theatricals.¹⁶ But in February, 1846, a new theatre was opened by Mr. Bates of Cincinnati, and considerable effort was made to maintain it on a higher plane.¹⁷ During the three or four years just before the close of the first half of the century many famous actors and actresses played to Louisville audiences.

Julia Dean, who was a granddaughter of Samuel Drake, was one of these. During the latter part of February and the first of March, 1847, she played an engagement.¹⁸ Newspaper critics remarked that her early faults had disappeared and complimented her "perfect and chaste piece of acting." On March 1 she volunteered her services for a benefit performance of Romeo and Juliet, the proceeds of which were to go to the suffering Irish.¹⁹

In the middle of the month J.E. Burdock appeared for four nights,

¹⁵ Saturday Courier (Philadelphia), November 4, 1843.

¹⁶ Casseday, op. cit., p. 117.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Louisville Journal, February 18 to March 3, 1847.

¹⁹ Ibid., March 1, 1847.

playing Shakespearean tragedies. His Hamlet was called "perfect and masterly."²⁰ The 1847 season closed March 29.²¹

On April 6, 1848, Forrest opened an engagement of a few nights at the Louisville Theatre, playing in Virginia. This was his farewell engagement previous to his retiring from the stage. Manager Bates raised the admission price for the occasion, but the audiences were tremendous.²² Metamora, King Lear, The Gladiator, and Hamlet were the other plays in which Forrest played during this last appearance, when he was at the zenith of his fame.²³

According to a newspaper critic, the theatrical advertisement of December 8, 1848, was of particular interest to the people of Louisville. The benefit of Mrs. Chapman, who was the daughter of the famous Mrs. Alexander Drake and who had been playing at the theatre during that season, was to be given that night. The writer was warm in his praise of Mrs. Chapman and spoke enthusiastically of Mrs. Drake as a tragic actress who was without rival in the United States. Mrs. Drake had come to Louisville for the sole purpose of playing at her daughter's benefit, and she was to appear as Madame Clermont in the drama Mother's Vengeance. The public was urged to go to the theatre that evening.²⁴ Apparently the advice of the critic was heeded, as the paper the next day said that the audience of the evening before was the largest and most fashionable of the season. Mrs. Drake

²⁰ Ibid., March 13, 15, and 17, 1847.

²¹ Ibid., March 29, 1847.

²² Ibid., April 6, 1848.

²³ Ibid., April 7, 8, 10, and 12, 1848.

²⁴ Ibid., December 8, 1848.

received thunders of applause, and it was the "uniform opinion that her equal had never appeared in that theatre."²⁵ Mrs. Drake remained in Louisville for a while and appeared in a benefit for another actor.²⁶

The 1848 season closed with a week's appearance of the famous tragedian J.B.Booth. His first performance of the engagement was in Richard III on December 23. The press comment on this performance was even more enthusiastic than that concerning Mr.Drake's appearance. Although the evening was cold and rainy, the house was by far the fullest and most fashionable of the season, a noble and flattering tribute to the reputation of the distinguished actor. The term "masterly performance" was considered a tame expression. "From the beginning to end, it was full of genius and truth and nature and startling energy."²⁷ During this engagement Mr.Booth played in both tragedy and comedy. Near the end of the engagement he was referred to as "one of the greatest, if not the very greatest of living actors."²⁸ On the evening of December 30 this famous player closed his engagement in Louisville, playing that evening in a benefit for the manager, Mr.J.W.Bates.²⁹

The year 1849 also brought prominent actors to the Louisville stage. One of the most famous who came during this year was Macready. He appeared for a week's engagement, beginning on April 16. Because of the great

²⁵ Ibid., December 9, 1848.

²⁶ Ibid., December 21, 1848.

²⁷ Ibid., December 23 and 25, 1848.

²⁸ Ibid., December 29, 1848.

²⁹ Ibid., December 30, 1848.

expense incurred, the manager felt justified in raising the admission prices and suspending the entire free list with the exception of the press.³⁰ The newspaper critic was again very enthusiastic, remarking that many who could find no seat were glad to have a place to stand and that the acting was commensurate with the attendance.³¹ After Macready's appearance in Macbeth the writer became even more extravagant in his praise: "Shakespeare and Macready...the greatest dead poet, the greatest living actor; the former, the diamond; the latter, the golden setting in which the brilliant shines."³² The actor continued to play before pleased and crowded audiences; it was estimated that there were a thousand people present on the last evening.³³ Macready's engagement was probably the outstanding theatrical event of the year.

The year which closed the first half of the century was an interesting one for Louisville theatre lovers. On January 28, 1850, Julia Dean made her first appearance in three years before Louisville audiences. According to critics she had improved much in acting and grace and particularly excelled in pathetic parts.³⁴ Extravagant praise followed each performance, Miss Dean's acting on one occasion being called "sufficient to justify her reputation as the best actress in the United States."³⁵ The house was

³⁰ Ibid., April 16, 1849.

³¹ Ibid., April 17, 1849.

³² Ibid., April 19, 1849.

³³ Ibid., April 23, 1849.

³⁴ Ibid., January 28, 29, and 31, 1850.

³⁵ Ibid., February 2, 1850.

crowded on each occasion, and two or three hundred were turned away the last evening.³⁶ Again in March Miss Dean played for five nights, appearing with tremendous success as Lucretia Borgia. At the close of this engagement the opinion was expressed that no other living actress was half so dear to the lovers of the drama in Louisville as was Miss Dean.³⁷

Murdock played another successful engagement beginning on February 28 of this year. In spite of the bad weather the attendance was good, and the audiences were pleased with Mr. Murdock's performances.³⁸

James H. Hackett, the famous comedian, played a brief engagement at the Louisville Theatre, beginning on April 1, 1850. This newspaper comment preceded his appearance:

"...In his peculiar line of characters he is unrivaled and unapproached...several characters that he has made emphatically and exclusively his own, and it would be presumption and folly in any other actor to undertake them where he has performed them."³⁹

Hackett played to large and delighted audiences. His best characters were probably Falstaff and Rip Van Winkle; his Rip Van Winkle is said to have made the audience laugh and weep at the same time.⁴⁰ He played Falstaff in Henry Vives of Windsor,⁴¹ and his last appearance of this engagement was as Falstaff in Henry IV.⁴²

³⁶ Ibid., February 9, 1850.

³⁷ Ibid., March 25 to 30, 1850.

³⁸ Ibid., February 28 to March 12, 1850.

³⁹ Ibid., April 1, 1850.

⁴⁰ Ibid., April 2, 1850.

⁴¹ Ibid., April 5, 1850.

⁴² Ibid., April 6, 1850.

Mrs. Alexander Brake came to Louisville again for a few nights' performance during April. She was again called "one among the greatest of American actresses" and was complimented for her quietness of manner, freedom from rant, and purity of tones.⁴³

This successful season was brought to a close with a benefit for the stage and acting manager, Mr. Crisp. According to the newspaper writer, Mr. Bates had spared no pains or expense to make the theatre a resort of amusement and had earned the thanks of all.⁴⁴

⁴³ Ibid., April 17 to 24, 1850.

⁴⁴ Ibid., May 18, 1850.

CHAPTER VII

SOME PHASES OF THE EARLY THEATRE

The earliest theatres must have been crude make-shifts, and those of Kentucky were probably no exception. Any vacant building that could be fitted to the purpose at all was usually seized upon by energetic managers and turned into a place called "The Theatre." Court houses were often used; hotel ball rooms sometimes were large enough to give performances in, and often an upstairs room was all that was available. The first theatre at Lexington was a room in the second story of a building that had been a brewery,³⁷¹ and Louisville's first scene of dramatic performances was described as little better than a barn.³⁷²

The heating and lighting arrangements were of the crudest type.

There was, of course, no steam heating plant, and there was usually one large stove in the center around which the spectators often crowded between acts. Notices were often posted in the lobbies requesting the audience not to spit on the stove, and notices also asked ladies and gentlemen to bring their own charcoal foot warmers. These were small, square boxes with perforated lids and metal receptacles inside for hot coals.³⁷³

Candles were the means of lighting until oil lamps came into use.

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Ludlow, op. cit., p.90.

³⁷²

McCartrie, op. cit., p.135.

³⁷³

Forblow, op. cit., I, 47.

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Candles were also in general use for footlights,⁴ and just before the play began, these were lit by a torch. It was not unusual during a tender love scene or moment of tense tragedy for a stage hand to come and snuff the smoking candle wicks. Scenes or candles were used along the walls or projecting from balconies or boxes.⁵

Colonel Gray gives the following picture of Drake's theatre after it had been remodeled:

"The old motto, 'Over the proscenium, Veluti In Spectum, had been resilled, the walls handsomely frescoed, the hangings and curtains and the ornamental woodwork being of crimson and gold. On each wing hung large chandeliers studded with wax candles; others of smaller size being grouped along the circles of the first and second tiers of boxes. Lamplighters came with slender ladders, upon which they mounted, and touching the wicks saturated with turpentine, the house was at once in a blaze of light."⁶

In such bright accessories as chandeliers and wax candles the Louisville theatre was abreast of the greater metropolitan theatres.

It is said that in 1830 the Louisville theatres used whale or sperm oil in astral lamps protected by shades. In 1840 they used gas unprotected.⁷

When Mr. Drake came to Kentucky, he brought his stage scenery from New York. The entire stock consisted of but six scenes, which could be put

⁴ A Louisville historian (Captain Alfred Pirtle) thinks that candles were never used in Louisville for footlights, but Mr. Young E. Allison says that in Henderson, Kentucky, candles were used for footlights as late as 1860. See letter from the Reference Librarian, Louisville Public Library, to Mr. John P. Barnall, August 13, 1919.

⁵ Hornblow, op. cit., I, 47.

⁶ Gray, op. cit., pp. 119-120.

⁷ Letter to Mr. John P. Barnall.

up or taken down in a few hours.⁸ It became the custom a little later for local theatres to furnish settings, especially after the beginning of stock company days, when there were few traveling companies. These scenic effects furnished by local theatres were, of course, scant, but every effort was made to produce realistic settings. If there was occasion to put upon the stage a table set for a meal, wooden fowls, colored water, and the like were not used; but real food and wine were set forth, "the egg-dressing plainly visible on the cold fowl, and the popping of real corks and the gurgle of real wine audible through the house."⁹

Speaking of a crude theatre in Nashville in 1817, Ludlow writes:

"The finest ladies of the city would sit out a long five-act comedy or tragedy on a narrow board not more than ten inches wide, without any support for their backs, and appear delighted with the performance, but then they had not been corrupted with fast times, sensational dramas, and easy, cushioned chairs."¹⁰

It is probable that this description would have fitted any Kentucky theatre and theatre-goer.

In the very early days of the Western theatre the players traveled in companies by any available means, playing in any town that could support them. Often these were family groups, the Drake family being the most famous example of such a company. A unique feature of the early drama in the West was the river showboat or floating theatre. Itinerant players, traveling on canal boats and flat-bottoms, gave performances in the little cabins at each settlement along the river banks they came to.

⁸ A fuller description of Drake's scenery is given in Chapter IV.

⁹ Gray, op. cit., pp. 118-119.

¹⁰ Ludlow, op. cit., p. 115.

prominent among the players who adopted this form was the Chapman family. They had a large flatboat with a rude house built on it. Above the roof a flag was attached with the word "Theatre" on it. Inside, hard board seats stretched from one side of the boat to the other, and at the far end was a small stage. Chapman and his family lived and acted on this boat for years, traveling up and down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, visiting all the principal towns.⁴⁷¹¹ Stories are told of the actors amusing themselves during waits by fishing, "dropping a line over the stern of the ark."¹²

As ways of traveling were exceedingly slow and difficult, touring companies became less and less numerous, and the stock company became a feature of Western theatricals. In the cities where there were established theatres the manager engaged a company for the season, the principal members of which were fairly good actors competent to take part in almost any play. These actors furnished the support for the stars, who alone traveled. A great tragedian came with his valet only, and a leading actress with her maid.⁴⁸¹³ The system of "starring" which thus was added to the system of stock-company circuits became one of the most important features of Western theatricals, and it is condemned as one of the real causes of the gradual decay of the stage. Players who had a large following were generally engaged for a limited time and were given such prominence that the remainder of the actors were completely overshadowed

⁴⁷11 Hornblow, op. cit., I, 348-349.

⁴⁸12 Smith, Theatrical Management, p. 99.

⁴⁹13 Johnston, op. cit., II, 383.

and practically unnoticed. It seemed so desirable to set the stars out in bold relief that authors writing plays for particular actors were given instructions to that effect. The result was that often dramas failed because too much was given one person to do, and that person was frequently incapable of filling his role.¹⁴ Theatrical historians in general denounce this system, and Ludlow even goes so far as to call it "a curse on the profession and a nuisance to the public."¹⁵ Its only saving feature was the fact that in this way theatre-lovers in Western towns were enabled to see great actors perform and to see the great dramas which these actors usually chose to present. Shakespearean plays were the favorites with most of these famous visitors.¹⁶

Another feature of frontier theatricals was the plays given to aid the actors and those given for charitable and other worthy causes. There were two sources of actors' incomes, regular salaries and benefits. The benefits were intended to supplement the actors' regular salaries, which were, in general, small. Managers had individual agreements with members of the company concerning the number of benefits to be allowed during a season. Practically every member had a benefit and made money according to the way he was estimated by the public.¹⁷ Naturally the more popular actors profited considerably from this system, although the minor ones did not.

¹⁴Ludlow, op. cit., p. 486.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 71.

¹⁶Ludlow, op. cit., p. 490.

¹⁷Ludlow, op. cit., p. 386.

The other type of benefit, that for charity, was quite often given, particularly in the earlier days. Proceeds from a benefit of this kind went to the poor, orphans, churches, hospitals, and similar causes.

The programs given in the early theatres were long and varied. Drama, spectacles, dancing, recitation, pantomime, and combination dramatic-equestrian performances were presented to charm the eye and ear of the theatre-goer. Farces, melodramas, and comic operas were staples. Two plays were given in one evening; one of these was often a tragedy or a comedy of the higher type; but the other was usually a farce, called by various names, such as "farce," "afterpiece," "interlude," "extravaganza," or "petit comedy." A prologue was often spoken by a leading member of the company.¹⁸ Exotic and very expensive spectacles were popular.¹⁹ Although many of the performances were of little or no literary value, some of the best plays of all time were favorites and were presented often. Shakespearean dramas were in high favor.

Manager Drake is said to have had a singular inclination to add subtitles to plays, perhaps in an effort to arouse more interest in his programs. To the Honey Moon he would add or the Painter and His Three Daughters. To the Hunter of the Alps he added or the Runaway Horse That Flung Its Rider in the Forest of Savoy. But the most striking of all is Richard the Third; or, The Death of Young Edward at Tewkesbury, and of

¹⁸At the opening of the Lexington Theatre, June 10, 1815, Mrs. Turner spoke fifty-five lines. Kentucky Gazette, June 19, 1815.

¹⁹A special scene representing the burning of the "Philadelphia" in the bay at Tripoli was given in Lexington in 1816. Kentucky Gazette, September 11, 1816.

King Henry the Sixth in London; the Courtship of the Pyhule Duke Richard
and Marriage with Lady Anne; Unnatural Murder of the Children of Edward
Plantagenet in the Tower; the Coronation of the Usurper; Rise of a Formi-
dable Rebellion in Wales; Overthrow of Buckingham, and His Decapitation;
Death of the Tyrant at the Battle of Bosworth Field, and Accession of
Henry the Seventh to the Throne of England;^{20 5^b}

As the programs were quite long, they began very early. The earliest²¹
theatrical performances given at Lexington began as early as six o'clock,²²
and as late as 1847 programs at the Louisville Theatre began at seven.²³
Admission prices usually ranged from fifty cents to a dollar, being raised
or lowered at the manager's discretion. Prices were sometimes raised to
keep out undesirable persons, and they were seldom lowered.

The conduct of the audience was constantly a matter of concern to
managers, and they were always anxious to placate that part of the public
which so opposed theatricals. Notices were frequently published asking the
audience to conform to certain regulations. Negroes were usually barred
entirely or admitted only to separate sections of the house.²⁴ As early
as 1830 Drake's Louisville theatre had a totally separate entrance for
ladies who were not received in society.²⁵ In 1840 instituted a further
reform by refusing admission to any female who did not come attended by a

²⁰ Smith, The Theatrical Apprenticeship, p. 29.

²¹ Lexington Gazette, February 26, November 14 and 21, 1799.

²² Louisville Journal, February 3, 1847.

²³ Id., ib., p. 431.

²⁴ Stuart, ib., ib., 11, 1851.

gentleman, and "women notoriously of the have were never, under any conditions, admitted." The result of these rigid measures was that the third tier in his theatres was as quiet and orderly as any portion of the house.²⁵ Frontier audiences had the very troublesome custom of calling for favorite songs not in the bills of the day, yet known to have been sung by some popular performer then in the company. This was particularly true of the "Jim Crow" songs, which were such great favorites.²⁶ Very annoying and insistent demands were made for these songs, and the actors were forced to yield to the wishes of the public.

Some of the customs and features of theatricals mentioned in this chapter are blamed as causes of the decline of the drama. The practice of setting aside certain sections for evil women might have been a necessary evil, but it had a bad effect in the end. Plays written especially for certain players were very often poor ones and sometimes called for more ability than the actor had. Other features of the starring system reduced the general level of theatricals. Perhaps in their very efforts to arouse the interest of the public, theatrical managers helped bring about a decline of the drama. Sensational and vulgar shows, exhibitions of beasts, and other spectacular performances had a cheapening effect. But in spite of these facts the early Kentucky theatre afforded intellectual entertainment and a center of culture for pioneer citizens---the best available under frontier conditions.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 350.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 393.

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